



Excerpted from *Chef's Choice: 22 Culinary Masters Tell How Japanese Food Culture Influenced Their Careers and Cuisine* by Saori Kawano and Don Gabor
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ELIZABETH ANDOH

Cookbook Author/Director, A Taste of Culture

Elizabeth Andoh was born and raised in America, although Japan has been her home for more than four decades. Ms. Andoh's formal culinary training was taken at the Yanagihara School of Traditional Japanese Cuisine, in Tokyo. In 1972 she began "A Taste of Culture," a culinary arts program that combines spicy tidbits of food lore with practical tips and skill-building lessons on how to prepare Japanese food. Her programs are conducted in Tokyo and offer a unique opportunity for foreign residents and visitors from overseas to explore and enjoy Japan's culture through its food.

Ms. Andoh is the author of six cookbooks, including the award-winning *Washoku: Recipes from the Japanese Home Kitchen*. She publishes an electronic newsletter about six times a year. Each issue includes a short essay/story focused on some aspect of Japan's food culture. Newsletters include links to photo-illustrated recipes that relate to the chosen theme; those recipes can be downloaded, making it easy for subscribers to take them into the kitchen when they cook. A Taste of Culture's newsletters are free at www.tasteofculture.com.

Influences

I had no experience with Japanese food, so I had nothing to compare it with, which may have been a good thing, because I had no real expectations of how it should taste.

I ended up in Japan by happy accident 40 plus years ago. I was born and raised in New York City. While attending the University of Michigan, I became aware that a scholarship at the Center for Japanese Studies went unclaimed. I applied and landed on the island of Shikoku, which in the mid-1960s was extremely rural. There were no flush toilets. You had to pump water from a well, and there was a small, old-fashioned refrigerator in addition to the icebox.

I stayed with the Andoh family, which is how I got to know the senior Mrs. Andoh (the woman who would become my mother-in-law), and meet (and eventually marry) one of her sons. My husband, Atsunori, is next to the youngest in birth order.

The Andoh household where I stayed had a totally different rhythm than I was used to. Mrs. Andoh was a talented practitioner of *washoku*—a traditional way of preparing Japanese food. Literally, *washoku* means “harmony of food.” It is a way of thinking about what we eat and how it can nourish us. Mrs. Andoh ran a large household that included cooking for her husband’s factory workers, so her kitchen was like a small restaurant. She had a limited budget, but she purchased and fully used ingredients, preserving their nutrition while coaxing out the very best flavor. She had a real flair for food.

At that time I didn’t speak a word of Japanese, so I didn’t really understand what was happening, but everyone seemed quite happy about the food they ate, so I figured there had to be something special

about it. It was simply up to me to figure out what that was. I had no experience with Japanese food, so I had nothing to compare it with, which may have been a good thing, because I had no real expectations of how it should taste.

In Shikoku, everyone eats udon, the slithery, thick white wheat noodles every day. It's not necessarily served instead of rice—you can also have rice with the noodles. I have always preferred salty food to sweet, so there was something very appealing about pickles and rice. I fell in love with pickled plums—*umeboshi*—especially first thing in the morning. I have never been a donut-and-coffee person.

I decided I wanted to stay in Japan a bit longer, although staying would definitely require that I learn the language. In 1967, I traveled to Tokyo to be part of a pilot program to teach Japanese to those not brought up in Japanese culture. It was a very intensive program.

I was living in a rented room in somebody's house and needed to learn to cook for myself. When I asked Mrs. Andoh for some of her recipes, she said, "Since you are in Tokyo now, you should take lessons from the writer and teacher, Toshio Yanagihara. I'll write him a letter."

Career Path

Mrs. Andoh forgot to mention that I wasn't Japanese, so when I showed up for the interview, Master Yanagihara was a little surprised.

Master Yanagihara was a man with the mindset of the Meiji Period—you know, the turn of the nineteenth century, officially from

1868 to 1912—who appreciated things that were not Japanese. He was such a magnificent writer! He could communicate. He knew exactly what phrase to use and how to describe food so that you could taste it and appreciate it. This experience led me to consider food writing as a career. Master Yanagihara told me, “Hang in there. Basic training at my school is three years. Then you can write about it in English and get the rest of the world excited.”

Early into this three-year course, Master Yanagihara came to me and said, “You need to write your own book. Translating my work—nobody’s going to get it.” In 1972, I queried *Gourmet* magazine as to whether the editors were interested in some pieces on Japanese food culture, and the answer was yes! In 1975 they published my series of six pieces. The rest is history. I served as *Gourmet* magazine’s Japanese food correspondent until 2007.

Cuisine

The word “washoku” is a philosophy and a mindset—and it’s also the food that’s produced when you’re in that mindset.

Washoku is Japanese food, but the *wa* character also means “harmony.” The Japanese think of themselves and all of the things they do, including their cultural traditions surrounding food, as harmonious. It’s a question of achieving balance. The word *washoku* is a philosophy and a mindset—and it’s also the food that’s produced when you’re in that mindset.

I refer to the person who is making the food as the *practitioner*, because he or she practices washoku. It's a very active engagement. There are three groupings of five elements that are important for the practitioner and the person being fed. The three groupings are color, flavor, and what I call *transformation* (as opposed to cooking). If you call it cooking, it implies the application of heat, and sometimes you don't apply heat.

There are five colors: red, yellow, and green, followed by black and white. It's not about equal distribution. It's about balance.

Among these colors, red is the largest category. It includes purple, pink, orange, and even browns. If you know anything about nutrition, you know that red foods are typically rich in polyphenols, and that certain other nutrients appear in leafy greens, so without much effort, if you've got balance of color, you've got nutritional balance. It doesn't require complicated calculations.

The second group is flavor. The big three flavors are sweet, sour, and salty, followed by bitter and spicy. The bitter taste cleanses the palette and helps you to appreciate other flavors. Bitter is used in small amounts to reset your palette. These bitter accents are subtle and spice plays a different role: it is much more about aroma than heat. And when there is heat, it is different. Think of wasabi—it's frontal and nasal, while sansho pepper is tongue-tingling.

So now we come to the third group: transformation. In preparing a meal, ingredients are changed or transformed in some way. The Japanese combine various methods: some foods are simmered, some foods are seared with heat, some foods are steamed (*mushimono*) or fried using a bit of oil, and some foods are eaten raw.

When planning and preparing a meal, you have many things to consider: color, flavor, and the method by which you will transform your ingredients into a finished dish. Combine the elements of five colors, five flavors, and five preparation methods in different ways, and you've got not 15, but three to the fifth power—that's a lot of combinations!

One concept that's not addressed in the three main groups is "mouth-feel," which is very important to the Japanese.

There are certain textures that the Japanese adore, and the uninitiated may have a hard time appreciating them. For example, the Japanese love *neba neba*, or the slimy, sticky, gooey and stringy texture of boiled okra. *Junsai*, also called "watershield" is another Japanese favorite. The unfurled leaves are covered in a slippery, transparent jelly. It's an alien mouth feel. Forget the taste of it or the smell of it—it's just weird in your mouth! There's a crunch and a slither, and then a briny explosion on your tongue. And it isn't something that happens with other foods—it's a very unusual eating experience.

Another aspect of Japanese food culture is *kansha*, or "appreciation." It compels us to use food and resources fully, not to waste anything—even water. For example, when I was first at the Andoh home in Shikoku, I literally had to go outside and pump water from the well. Pump and schlep. You do not waste water! If you're going to use that water to blanch oily *abura-age*—a deep-fried tofu pouch—and spinach or some other green vegetable, blanch your greens first.

You need to be mindful. It is not necessarily difficult or more time consuming, but you need to be aware of possible waste and avoid it. This is also part of practicing washoku and kansha.

One style of washoku cooking is taking a single ingredient and making a whole meal with it.

It's funny, because the original *Iron Chef* TV program picked up on that idea, but it's an ancient notion in Japanese cooking. You had a lot of seasonal foods that were locally grown. That was it and probably had to do with necessity in the days before refrigeration and swift transportation. So the really talented chef was not the one who could acquire some exotic or wildly expensive ingredient, but, rather, the person who could take a very simple, humble carrot or daikon and explode the possibilities into a full-course banquet. That notion of taking a very limited item and making various things from it is not unique to the culinary arts. Think about black-and-white brush paintings. You've got a very limited palette, yet can create the impression of varied color. It's about seeing the possibilities in something that has limitations.

Ingredients

Sometimes people were taking Japanese ingredients and using them in ways that the Japanese would not use them.

Today many food critics consider mixing cuisines as fusion. In 1985 I wrote a book, *An American Taste of Japan*, which was about what I called cross-cultural cuisine, and it was far ahead of its time. At that time, I had lived in Japan for almost 20 years, and when I came back to America, I discovered that you could create a Japanese meal anywhere. It had nothing to do with being Japanese and nothing to do with geography. Sometimes people were taking ordinary Japanese ingredients and using them in ways that the Japanese would not use them.

By the mid 1980s, particularly in New York, *shiso*, a perennial herb in the mint family, was beginning to come into popularity. Certainly enoki mushrooms were available. There was wasabi, although it was mostly powder. There were all sorts of foods out there that had not been available 20 years before. People in America began to play with them.

At the same time a new cooking style evolved in Japan when Japanese chefs went to Europe to train and then returned to Japan. Influence and inspiration—and it's inevitable.

Today, Americans no longer assume that cooking with Japanese ingredients is something that only the Japanese do.

Americans are buying Japanese ingredients. People are willing to consider Japanese ingredients as part of their diet and their pantry. This is particularly true among food professionals. But many do not understand the ingredients, and they don't know what they can do and should or should not do.

Enoki mushrooms, for example, don't have to be cooked very long, but a food chemist finally explained to me that there's an enzyme in

them that needs to be eliminated. In Japan, cooks usually place enoki mushrooms at the bottom of a bowl and pour hot broth on top. That's all the heat you need to neutralize this enzyme. However, Americans were putting raw enoki mushrooms on salads, as they do with regular mushrooms. Nothing bad happened, but people experienced a slight bit of indigestion.

Another example is wasabi. If you heat wasabi, it does ugly things, so you should add it at the end of the cooking process. Otherwise, it becomes bitter and turns an unappetizing color, especially if you use the powder instead of the real stuff. Frequently Japanese ingredients are used incorrectly.

That's why it's so useful to experience the cuisine and to study how traditional cooks prepare Japanese food. In this way, you can increase your ability to use the ingredients the right way and guide your curiosity in the right direction.

Certainly one kind of miso is not going to be interchangeable with another in any given recipe. It's just not. They're very different.

There were two reasons why I started my tasting programs with Japanese ingredients in the early 1990s. First, no individual is going to go out there and buy 20 different kinds of miso to discover what the range is. If you lived your formative years in Japan or traveled a bit there, you might eventually experience dozens of different kinds of miso without trying.

But if you are living in Chicago or Dallas, it's unlikely that you're going to get a sense of what miso is all about. Yet, certainly one kind

of miso is not going to be interchangeable with another in any given recipe. It's just not. They're very different.

On another level, you have something like *kombu*—kelp—which is naturally occurring umami. There are different varieties of kombu kelp and kinds of water (hard or soft) that will influence taste. People in Kansai region Osaka prefer *ma-kombu*, while people in Tokyo prefer *Hidaka kombu*. When I was conducting miso- or kombu-tasting programs, most participants could taste the difference. But those new to ingredients such as miso or kombu had trouble.

Training

The key to understanding the Japanese approach to food preparation is that nothing goes to waste and everything is fully used, appreciated.

At A Taste of Culture I offer different programs for different audiences. The mini-intensives focus on understanding basic ingredients and techniques, and applying them to a wide variety of foods. It's a fast-paced, tightly packed curriculum that appeals to food professionals and serious home cooks.

Because it's important to understand your ingredients, I often include a segment I call "A Peek in the Pantry," in which we sample many varieties of common basic ingredients such as vinegar, miso, and kelp. By exploring the difference between a barley-enriched *mugi*

miso and a soybean-only *Hatcho* miso, students gain the basic knowledge and experience they need to successfully experiment with these foods outside the Japanese culinary context.

I was facilitating for several Japanese chefs from Japan in Napa, California at the 2007 Culinary Institute of America's Worlds of Flavor Conference. The Japanese chefs were given huge garbage bags and huge garbage cans, but in the end there was almost nothing in them even though they were making food for 250 people. At the end of filleting the fish, they made *hone sembei*, crisp little bone crackers. And the kombu that was left over from making the dashi stock went into making the food the chefs ate themselves. It's an important culinary skill. An important part of the notion of washoku is kansha (appreciation), which recognizes the potential for fully utilizing ingredients.

I also offer programs in Japan for the ex-pat community, the foreign community whose members typically live there for two to three years because of business.

Many don't feel compelled to learn to cook Japanese food because they can go out and eat good Japanese food anywhere, but they want to understand why it tastes great at one restaurant and not at another.

And often food that is served to them is unrecognizable, and that can cause anxiety. So the goal for many of the people who come into my programs in Japan who are not food professionals is to achieve a certain comfort level with ingredients and dishes that are totally alien to them.

I sometimes structure programs as Kansha Challenges, offering a group only a few ingredients they must share—and use fully—in order to produce a meal. Sometimes, when I travel within the U.S. I ask those in my network (colleagues and volunteers who help me test recipes for my books) to help me put together events in their community. I like to do fundraisers for local groups. I contact a local culinary school and tell them I will teach a class to ten of their students if those students will be my assistants during the fundraiser.

This is a great experience for everyone. The young kids—what enthusiasm! They have no preconceived notions about the preparations. They are very curious and very enthusiastic, so it is a matter of harnessing that energy in a specific way. I taught them how to be my assistants and to help me produce whatever food I was making for the event. They needed to learn how to make stock, but not always in the traditional way. Because I also offered a program that was vegetarian, we used dried shiitake mushrooms instead of fish flakes.

The students had to learn about the order in which certain ingredients are added, because the chemistry of the food wasn't familiar to them.

For example, they learned that saké and sugar go in first, and soy sauce is added only at the very end. They learned the shared traditions handed down and developed over thousands of years, as well as the order and timing necessary in Japanese food preparation. They learned the whole notion that a meal can be served pretty much at room temperature and that it doesn't necessarily require a whole lot of refrigeration. They learned about the rhythm in the kitchen. I kept returning to the rhythm and the pace of the kitchen because it was

different from western ways. It was really exciting to see them get it. They were surprised at how complex the flavors were from such straightforward preparations.

A Day in the Life

The training styles and expectations of chefs from Japan and those of culinary students from the U.S. are very different.

A clear example of the differences between Japanese and United States' training styles came to light at the 2007 Culinary Institute of America's Worlds of Flavor Conference. The students assumed that they were going to be able to look over the visiting Japanese chefs' shoulders and ask them questions. They thought that they were going to have conversations and be able to chat. But the training style of Japanese chefs is quite different—it requires students to be patient, remain quiet, and employ keen observational skills.

One does not walk into an exclusive Japanese restaurant like the ones these chefs worked in and simply expect to be shown everything. Students needed to hold their questions until the end. After they had seen the flow of action and had established a context, then they could ask their questions. If they were still puzzled, then that was the time to engage. But some of the culinary students kept asking questions, expecting to be shown everything. One even picked up the Japanese chefs' knives! I thought people were going to be killed!



Did you enjoy this mini memoir? If so please email us your opinion at don@dongabor.com.

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